Building DEI from the Inside Out: A North Carolina Playbook Inspired by Shane Windmeyer
How companies can move beyond statements and build inclusion into strategy, culture, and leadership

Across North Carolina, companies are navigating a complicated but important reality. Expectations around diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) have grown, while clarity on how to implement the work effectively has not always kept pace. Leaders want to do the right thing—for their people, their customers, and their communities—but many remain unsure how to begin in a way that feels grounded, credible, and sustainable.

In a state known for its balance of tradition and innovation, DEI cannot be approached as a one-size-fits-all initiative. What works in a global tech firm in Raleigh may not translate directly to a family-owned manufacturer in western North Carolina. The most effective strategies recognize this nuance and focus less on optics and more on integration.

This inside-out approach to DEI—one that embeds inclusion into how organizations operate every day—is increasingly shaping how North Carolina companies move forward. Leaders like Shane Windmeyer have helped shift the conversation from performative gestures to practical systems that actually change outcomes.

Why North Carolina Requires a Different DEI Lens

North Carolina's workforce reflects the state's broader complexity. It is multigenerational, racially and culturally diverse, geographically dispersed, and shaped by deeply rooted community ties. Employees often stay within industries or regions for years, meaning trust and reputation matter as much as policy.

Because of this, DEI efforts that feel imposed or disconnected from local realities tend to stall. Employees may disengage not because they oppose inclusion, but because they do not see how it applies to their work or values.

Successful organizations start by reframing DEI not as a political or ideological issue, but as a fairness and effectiveness issue. The question becomes simple: are people being treated equitably, and are systems designed to give everyone a genuine opportunity to succeed?

As Shane Windmeyer has emphasized, DEI works best when it is positioned as a tool for better leadership and stronger organizations—not as a moral lecture or branding exercise.

Begin with Organizational Self-Awareness

One of the most overlooked DEI strategies is honest self-assessment. Before launching new programs or public commitments, North Carolina companies benefit from understanding their current reality.

This includes reviewing workforce demographics, turnover patterns, promotion rates, and pay equity, but it also requires qualitative insight. How do employees experience leadership? Do they feel safe raising concerns? Do they see pathways for growth?

Self-awareness builds credibility. When leaders can clearly articulate where gaps exist and why they matter, employees are more likely to trust the process. Shane Windmeyer often points out that organizations lose momentum when they rush to solutions without fully understanding the problem they are trying to solve.

Tie DEI to How Decisions Are Made

Incorporating DEI effectively means embedding it into decision-making processes, not treating it as a parallel effort. Every organization already has systems that shape outcomes—hiring, evaluations, project assignments, and succession planning. These systems either reinforce equity or undermine it.

North Carolina companies making progress are reviewing these processes with intentionality. Are hiring criteria consistent and job-related? Are performance reviews influenced by subjective norms that advantage some groups over others? Are high-visibility opportunities distributed equitably?

When DEI is incorporated into these everyday decisions, it stops feeling abstract. Employees see fairness in action, not just language on a website. According to Shane Windmeyer, this operational focus is where real inclusion begins to take root.

Focus on Managers, Not Just Messaging

Managers sit at the intersection of strategy and experience. They shape how policies are interpreted, how feedback is delivered, and how conflict is handled. Yet many DEI efforts overlook managers, focusing instead on high-level messaging or one-time trainings.

In North Carolina workplaces, where relationships and respect carry significant weight, manager behavior often determines whether DEI efforts succeed or fail. Investing in manager capability—through coaching, scenario-based learning, and clear expectations—can dramatically improve inclusion outcomes.

This does not require turning managers into DEI specialists. It requires giving them practical tools to lead fairly, communicate across differences, and address issues before they escalate. Shane Windmeyer frequently underscores that inclusive cultures are built one manager at a time.

Make Listening a Core Strategy

Listening is not a preliminary step in DEI—it is an ongoing strategy. Companies that incorporate DEI effectively create structured ways to hear from employees and act on what they learn.

In North Carolina, where employees may be cautious about speaking openly, listening efforts must be intentional and trustworthy. Anonymous surveys, facilitated listening sessions, and employee resource groups can all provide insight, but only if leaders respond with transparency and follow-through.

When employees see that feedback leads to action, trust grows. When feedback is ignored or minimized, skepticism deepens. Shane Windmeyer often notes that listening without accountability can be more damaging than not listening at all.

Set Priorities That Are Realistic and Measurable

Another hallmark of effective DEI incorporation is focus. Trying to address every issue at once often leads to burnout and confusion. Instead, organizations benefit from setting a small number of clear priorities tied to business and workforce needs.

For example, a company might focus on improving frontline retention, diversifying leadership pipelines, or ensuring equitable access to professional development. These priorities should be supported by data, resourced appropriately, and reviewed regularly.

In North Carolina’s results-oriented business culture, measurable progress matters. Clear goals help leaders stay accountable and allow employees to see that DEI is more than an aspirational concept. As Shane Windmeyer has observed, progress builds confidence—and confidence sustains momentum.

Commit to DEI as an Ongoing Practice

Perhaps the most important strategy is recognizing that DEI incorporation is never “finished.” Workforces change, markets evolve, and social expectations shift. Inclusion must adapt alongside them.

For North Carolina companies, this means treating DEI as a leadership discipline rather than a temporary initiative. It requires revisiting assumptions, refining systems, and staying engaged even when external attention wanes.

Organizations that take this long-term view are better positioned to navigate uncertainty, attract diverse talent, and build cultures of trust. Shane Windmeyer often frames DEI not as a trend to manage, but as a capability to develop—one that strengthens organizations over time.

A Practical Path Forward

North Carolina does not need louder DEI statements. It needs thoughtful, disciplined incorporation that reflects how people actually work and live in the state. By focusing on self-awareness, decision-making systems, manager capability, listening, and accountability, companies can build inclusion from the inside out.

When DEI is treated as a practical strategy rather than a symbolic one, it becomes less polarizing and more powerful. And for organizations willing to do the work with intention and humility, the result is not just a more inclusive workplace—but a more resilient and effective one.